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ABSTRACT

The usefulness of presidential debates to the electorate and to the total political system is evaluated in this paper. The paper first reports the results of opinion polls concerning the value of the 1976 debates and cites studies showing the types of information that people obtained from watching the debates. It then considers whether voters' learning gains affected the quality of their electoral decisions. Evidence is examined with regard to vote stability, party affiliation, image voting, other predispositional factors, and issue voting; it is concluded that, contrary to expectations based on the "limited effects" model (which stresses the tendency of mass political communication to strengthen already-made commitments), the debates made an important contribution to rational issue-based voting. The paper then summarizes the usefulness of debates for some, though not all, types of election campaigns and argues for maintaining the concept of presidential debates as a possibility for future elections. The final section of the paper examines the validity of claims about the functions that debates can serve in benefiting enduring governmental and political institutions and in enabling the administration that wins an election to govern effectively. (GW)

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ARE DEBATES HELPFUL TO VOTERS?

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ARE DEBATES HELPFUL TO VOTERS?

In September of 1976 the nation had just eight weeks to decide whether to keep Gerald Ford as President or to replace him with Jimmy Carter, and half of the voters had not yet made up their minds.[1] The two major political parties had declined markedly in public attractiveness, and the Democrats were split into two wings that stood to the left and right, respectively, of the smaller Republican party on most policy questions.[2] The position of the Democratic nominee on many of these issues was uncertain in the minds of a substantial minority of voters.[3] And in the wake of the Vietnam-Watergate era, there seemed to be as much concern about the characterological merits of the candidates as with the political interests they represented.[4] It was in this context of voter uncertainty, bred of deficiencies of party identification and of information about the policies and personal qualities of the candidates, that the Ford-Carter debates were held.

Voters interviewed prior to the debates expressed high hopes for them. In particular, they expected to learn where each candidate stood "on the issues" and they anticipated being able to make up their minds in great measure on the basis of what they learned in the comparative testing ground of the debates.[5] The candidates wanted the debates too, Ford because he saw debating as a possible means of overtaking Carter's lead in the polls, and Carter on the assumption that the net result of debating would be about 50-50, which would allow him to maintain his lead while time ran out.[6]

In the research community that had studied debates, notably those of 1960, there was less enthusiasm. Complaints were registered about the dual press-conference format, in which some thought too much time was spent by reporters asking questions. There was little time for serious discussion of policy issues, many argued, and the 1960 debates had turned more on Nixon's celebrated five o'clock shadow and Kennedy's

telegenic style than on political content.[7] Some questioned whether it would be in the public interest for an incumbent President to place himself in the vulnerable debate setting where sensitive questions touching on national security might arise.[8] Political scientists saw the debates as part of a general process of erosion of political parties through personalization of the voting decision.[9] In all, there seemed to be as many reasons to be apprehensive about the Ford-Carter debates as there were grounds for optimism.

The purpose of this paper is to evaluate presidential debates as an emergent institution, with an eye to the question of whether they merit efforts to insure that debates are held in the future. The experience of 1976, as captured in some 30 studies of the debates and their audience, will form the main empirical basis for this evaluation.[10] The organizing point of view will be that of the usefulness of the debates, not necessarily that of their "effects." This means that the debates will be judged "effective" to the extent that the electorate gained from them, without regard to advantages won by either candidate over the other.[11] Putting it in [illegible]hat broader perspective, this paper will focus upon the functions of the debates [illegible]he individual voter and for the total political system of which the voter is a part.

It is important to make clear what is meant here by "the debates." For purposes of this analysis, this term can be taken to refer collectively to all of those events that occurred in 1960 and 1976 because the candidates chose to hold debates. This would include voter decisions that were withheld in anticipation of the debates; the media hype that preceded them; other campaign events that did not occur because the debates did; the press's analyses of who won and why; and subsequent campaign efforts by the candidates that built upon (or attempted to erase) events that occurred during or as a result of the debates. For purposes of comparison, the alternative to debates in this collective sense is what would have occurred in 1976 and 1960 if the candidates had chosen not to debate. This requires some speculation; we should not assume that, say, the debateless landslide elections of 1964

or 1972 resemble what the much closer 1960 and 1976 contests would have been like without debates.

Uses and Opinions of Debates

At the most superficial level of "use", that of mere exposure, presidential debates have been uniformly a great success. Estimates of the proportion of the electorate watching at least some of the debates ran as high as 90% in both 1960 and 1976.[12] The first Ford-Carter debate was turned on in 72% of all households according to the Nielsen ratings, and their final debate in 60%.[13] Gallup estimates for registered voters nationwide ran from 67% to 70% viewing the various Ford-Carter clashes.[14] High as these figures are, can they be explained by factors other than political interest? Viewers had little else to watch, since all three networks ran the debates in toto. But the same is true of other news events that do not attract nearly such large audiences: presidential addresses and press conferences, party conventions, congressional hearings.[15] The debates were the subject of enormous advance publicity, and offered the spectacle of live broadcasting (a rarity nowadays) of a competitive event of high stakes and uncertain outcome. But those things are equally true of a number of major sporting events (Super Bowl, World Series, heavyweight title boxing matches) that draw huge audiences but still fall far short of a 72% Nielsen rating.[16]

If we assume that the political content of debates is at least party responsible for attracting such large audiences, what is the nature of that attraction? Inferences from the 1960 studies suggest partisan motivations: to root for one's preferred candidate and to find reasons for rejecting his opponent.[17] If, on the other hand, we are to believe the self-reported motivations of the voters of 1976, the main reasons (in descending order) were to learn the candidates' positions on issues, to compare them as personalities, and to help in deciding which way to vote.[18] For example, 90% of an Akron, Ohio sample said learning issue stands was "very important", and 75% said the same thing about learning what the candidates

were like as people; 69% were looking for help in deciding between them, and 65% expected they would get that help from the debates.[19]

After the debates, and especially after the critiques of them in the press, people did not rate them so highly.[20] A Roper poll showed that only 14% considered the Ford-Carter debates #1 and #2 "very informative", and only 21% in Akron said they had learned something new and important about issues from debate #1.[21] The debates were also somewhat disappointing in terms of learning about the candidates as people, and in helping to decide how to vote. For example, 60% in one sample said it was at best "somewhat difficult" to get a true picture of the candidates, and only 16% of a national sample considered the debates "very revealing."[22] More undecided voters rated the first debate "poor" than "good" in one study, but in another considerably more said the debates had made their vote decisions easier (41%) than harder (13%).[23] And the overall ratings, even if people's highest hopes were not totally realized, were favorable: 78% in Akron though the debates were a "good idea", 93% of a student sample rated the first debate "worth seeing", and 75% of those who watched the Dole-Mondale debate were "glad" they had.[24]

The tendency to down-grade the debates seems to have been partly a result of post-debates critiques by the press. Comparison of immediate and delayed (next day) reactions to the first debate showed many more negative reactions after the interpolation of news media reactions, in a study of college students.[25] These post-debates press accounts focused mainly on who had won and why, at the expense of coverage of what was said by the candidates.[26] Perhaps the content of the debates did not seem particularly newsworthy to journalists who had been covering the campaign for months. At any rate, voters found much more concentration on the issues they said interested them, if they watched the debates rather than the subsequent press reports. One study that used the same coding system for all bodies of media content found that 37% of the time in debate #1 was spent on economic issues. But this topic accounted for only 14% of newspaper reports, and just 5% of television coverage, of the same debate.[27] A majority of the space in each medium was

devoted to material about who had won, how the candidates had performed, the personal qualities they projected, and how the debate would affect their campaigns.[28] Paradoxically, then, the debates themselves brought out issue content but they also stimulated press activity that obscured that information by heavy emphasis on the outcomes rather than the content of the debates.

Learning from Debates

But our assessment of the debates should not rely upon manifest content, nor upon introspective ratings, either by voters or by the press. We should have evidence that people learned something from the debates, whether they thought so or not. In 1960, researchers were not especially concerned with informational functions. Most of their efforts were directed at "images", persuasive effects, and selective patterns of exposure and perception. One of the remarkable findings was that the debates, which effectively minimized selective exposure, were also not subject to selective perception insofar as informational content was concerned. That is, people learned a good deal of information and they were as likely to learn it from statements made by the candidate they supported as they were when it came from the opposition candidate. This was found in two different studies, although in one of them it was also shown that viewers tended to misattribute statements they agreed with to their own candidate and statements with which they disagreed to his opponent.[29]

Evidence consistent with the hypothesis that issue-position information came out of the 1976 debates is shown in Table 1. The data are from a panel of N=164 Wisconsin residents, sampled statewide by the Wisconsin Survey Research Laboratory in 1976. Perceptions of Ford's and Carter's positions on four issues were tracked through the fall. In the week before the debates unsureness, as indicated by responding "don't know" when asked the candidates' positions, was about equally high for all four issues in Carter's case. There was somewhat more information about Ford's position on three of the four issues. When these same respondents were

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(Table 1 about here)

Table 1. "Don't Know" Candidates' Positions on Four Issues, Wisconsin 1976

		Before debates	After 1st debate	After last debate
Government action to increase employment	Ford	14%	6%	4%
	Carter	21%	7%	5%
Change tax system so high income people pay more	Ford	12%	5%	3%
	Carter	17%	5%	4%
Government spending for defense and military	Ford	11%	9%	5%
	Carter	20%	13%	7%
Legalized abortions	Ford	20%	16%	12%
	Carter	21%	17%	13%

Entries indicate the percentage who said "don't know" when asked to locate each candidate on a five-position scale regarding the listed issue. Data are from Wisconsin statewide panel (see Dennis, Chaffee and Choe, in press; Dennis and Chaffee, 1977).

interviewed in the week after the first debate, there had been a decrease in "don't knows" on all four issues -- but mainly on the two that were discussed in that debate (unemployment and tax reform); on these the Ford-Carter difference had all but disappeared. Then after all the debates were completed, the same people were interviewed a third time. There was a further decline in "don't knows" for all issues, but the drop from the previous interview was greatest for defense spending -- a topic that had been prominent in the later debates. There remained after the debates considerable doubt about the candidates' positions on abortion, a topic that both of them steered away from in the debates. In other analyses of the same data set, Dennis, Chaffee and Choe found very little change over time in the mean positions attributed to Ford and Carter, but a steady decrease in variance around those means. While it is impossible to divine what the candidates' "true" positions were, it appears that there was a gradual clarification of the public's perception of where they stood.

Other studies found more evidence of clarification of issue positions, at least for the first Ford-Carter debate. For example, greater differences on employment policy, with Ford becoming more clearly understood as emphasizing private sector jobs, were found after (as compared to before) Debate #1 in three different studies.[30] A Syracuse survey found a jump from 50% to 75% in the perception that Carter advocated reorganizing the federal government.[31] Four studies showed before-after increases in the perceptions that Carter favored and Ford opposed amnesty for Vietnam War draft evaders.[32]

Some clarification of issue positions would be expected over the course of a campaign in the absence of any debates on the topics, especially among people who are being repeatedly interviewed (e.g. abortion in Table 1). But in general there is not much evidence in the surveys that included waves just before and just after the first Ford-Carter debate, of clarification on topics that were not discussed in that debate ("control" topics). After the debate, Ford and Carter were seen as neither closer nor farther apart on such policies as the B-1 bomber project, gun

control, school busing, abortion, or defense spending.[33] There was also no change reported, in three studies, on national health insurance (although some people saw this as a topic emphasized in the first debate).[34]

There were also in 1976 a number of studies in which standard predictors of issue-information (e.g. education, partisanship) were used in multivariate post-election statistical analyses. With these factors controlled, there remained a small but significant cumulative effect of debate exposure on several issues: federal job programs, governmental reorganization, B-1 bomber.[35] A national post-election survey found a significant contribution of debate exposure to a four-issue index of perceived differences between the two major parties, When education, attention to politics, partisanship, and general media exposure were controlled.[36]

It seems safe to conclude that there was substantial political learning as a consequence of holding the debates in 1976. This was probably also true in 1960, although few studies attempted to document this kind of effect and many critics of those debates would agree with the judgment that "not even a trained observer could keep up with the cross-fire of fact and counter-fact."[37]

Informed Voting

The next issue is whether it can be shown that this learning had anything to do with the quality of the electoral decision. Such a question, mixing as it does value judgments with knotty epistemological problems, can never be answered to the full satisfaction of every school of scholarly inquiry. But there is evidence from 1976 that an important contribution to rational issue-based voting can be traced to the debates.

Before considering this encouraging evidence, let it be clear that there were two classes of voters for whom the debates could make no impact in terms of policy voting: (a) voters who had already definitely made up their minds before the debates occurred, and (b) voters who did not watch the debates and who paid little or no attention to media reports of them. As already noted, group (b) was relatively

small, surely no more than 20% of the electorate and probably less than 10%.[38] Group (a) was smaller than in previous elections on which comparable data are available. In the Wisconsin statewide sample, only about 31% of those who voted were definitely decided in the week prior to the debates. Panel data from local samples produced estimates in this same range: 26% in Cedar Rapids, Ia., and 40% in Madison, Wisc.[39] The possibility that the policy issue content of the debates would guide voting decisions in 1976 probably remained, then, for something more than one-half of the voters.

The idea that the debates would influence the vote by providing people with information on the candidates' issue positions is in general contrast to the "limited effects" model, which stresses the tendency of mass political communication to strengthen commitments that have already been made.[40] The 1976 data will be approached with limited-effects hypotheses, bearing in mind that an opposing theoretical viewpoint may be developed to the extent that the limited-effects model fails to hold up. Data from the Wisconsin statewide panel study will be relied upon to arbitrate these theoretical issues (Table 2).

(Table 2 about here)

Vote stability. First, the limited effects model would predict that the more a person watches the debates, the more stable and predictable his vote will become. In the Wisconsin sample, respondents were classified into three groups according to the extent to which they had watched the four debates: Regular Viewers, who had seen all of some debates, and at least some of each debate; Occasional Viewers, who had seen some but not all of the debates; and Non-Viewers, who watched no more than part of one debate. The predictability of the vote from the person's vote intention prior to the debates was highest among the Non-Viewers and lowest among the Regular Viewers (Table 2). Thus, contrary to the limited effects model, the data indicate that those who watched the debates were less stable in their voting intentions than those who did not.

TABLE 2

Summary of Regression Analyses of Vote Decision-Making Model, by Exposure to Debates

Dependent Variable	Predetermined Variable	Total Sample (N=164) Direct effect	Total Sample (N=164) Total effect	Low Exposure (N=35) Direct effect	Low Exposure (N=35) Total effect	Medium Exposure (N=65) Direct effect	Medium Exposure (N=65) Total effect	High Exposure (N=64) Direct effect	High Exposure (N=64) Total effect
Ideological difference	Party ID	.39***	.39	.14	.14	.35**	.35	.54***	.54
	SES	-.04	-.04	-.22	-.22	-.06	-.06	.06	.06
		R^2=.148		R^2=.048		R^2=.114		R^2=.292	
T_1 Vote intention	Party ID	.59***	.63	.49***	.51	.57***	.62	.67***	.72
	SES	.12	.11	.28	.25	.05	.04	.16	.17
	Ideology	.11	.11	.12	.12	.13	.13	.09	.09
		R^2=.427		R^2=.421		R^2=.408		R^2=.520	
Issue difference	Party ID	.10	.46	.43**	.58	-.07	.37	.08	.53
	SES	-.04	-.01	-.30	-.33	.19*	.18	-.02	.07
	Ideology	.35***	.39	.35*	.37	.47***	.52	.28*	.32
	T_1 Vote intention	.36***	.36	.19	.19	.45***	.45	.41**	.41
		R^2=.418		R^2=.479		R^2=.562		R^2=.426	
Candidate images	Party ID	.03	.46	-.05	.29	.16	.56	-.03	.49
	SES	-.09	-.03	-.25	-.12	-.08	-.07	-.03	.08
	Ideology	.20**	.26	.15	.23	.16	.23	.24*	.29
	T_1 Vote intention	.57***	.57	.63**	.63	.55***	.55	.55***	.55
		R^2=.453		R^2=.361		R^2=.527		R^2=.440	
Final vote	Party ID	.15*	.60	.12	.50	.27**	.67	.06	.61
	SES	.06	.09	-.08	.04	.09	.10	.01	.10
	Ideology	.04	.19	.16	.27	-.10	.04	.11	.30
	T_1 Vote intention	.41***	.61	.63***	.83	.41***	.59	.30*	.55
	Issue difference	.10	.10	-.12	-.12	.04	.04	.31**	.31
	Candidate images	.28***	.28	.35*	.35	.28**	.28	.22*	.22
		R^2=.685		R^2=.790		R^2=.730		R^2=.687	

Note: Direct effects entries are standardized regression coefficients (beta). Total effects include direct effects plus indirect effects (not shown in table) through intervening variables in the model.

*p<.05, **p<.01, ***p<.001

(Source: Dennis, Chaffee and Choe, in press)

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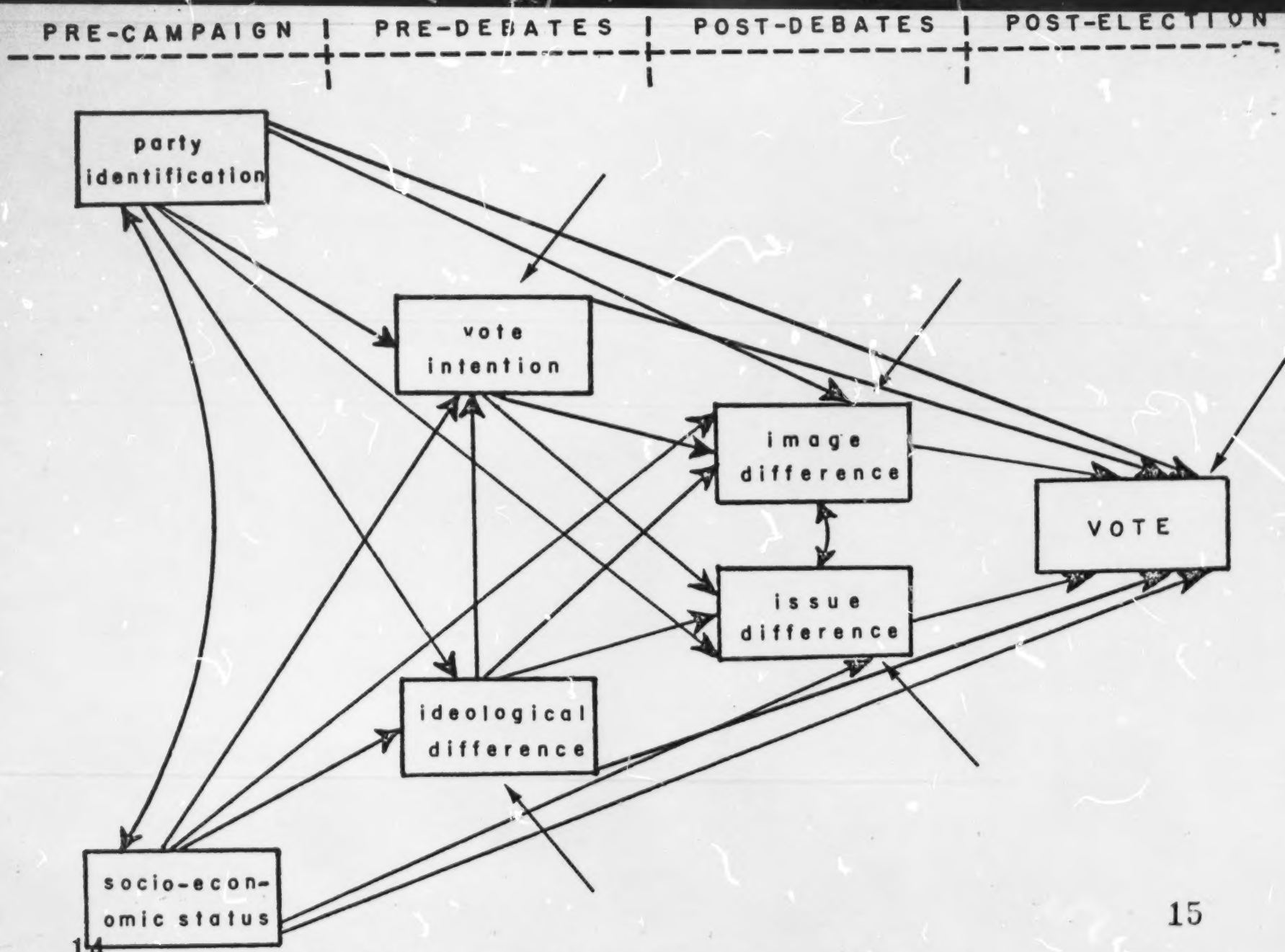

FIGURE 1. Direct Effects on the Vote

Note: This is the model tested in Table 2. (Source: Dennis, Chaffee and Choe, in press)

Party affiliation. A second set of predictions from the limited effects model are (1) that prior identification with a political party would be the strongest predictor of the vote, and (2) that party would have determined the vote before the debates began. Overall, party identification did have a strong total effect, and most of this was accounted for by its impact on the pre-debates vote intention (Table 2). There was also a significant direct effect of party, beyond that represented in early voting plans, but interestingly this latent effect of partisan ties was limited to the Occasional Viewers. Setting aside the terminology of a causal model, the behavior of the Occasional Viewers during the fall might be characterized as follows: they were the most party-oriented of voters, but they were somewhat unsure of the candidate nominated by their party; they tuned in to the debates sufficiently to assure themselves that this candidate was indeed worthy of their votes. The Non-Viewers, although they changed the least in vote intention, were the least party-oriented in their voting. The Regular Viewers were strongly guided by partisan considerations in their pre-debates vote intentions, but during the remainder of the campaign they were the least influenced by party ties despite the fact that they changed the most of any group. It is the Occasional Viewers who fit the limited effects model by finding in the debates reinforcement of tentative decisions to vote along party lines. Since they comprise only about 40% of the sample, the evidence in support of that model in the aggregate is rather weak.

Image voting. A variation on the limited effects theme has been to assert that presidential debates, rather than supplying voters with manifest issue information, serve simply to project appealing "images" of the candidates. This was the summary judgment from the 1960 debates studies.[41] The first hypothesis to be derived from this proposition is that those who watch the debates will be most likely to vote on the basis of the personality images they perceive of the candidates. The Wisconsin data are directly contrary to this prediction. In Table 2 favorable images (based on the sum of six scales) following the debates period predict the vote most strongly among the Non-Viewers and most weakly among the

Regular Viewers. These post-debates images are mainly determined by pre-debates events. There is practically no evidence in any study of changes in candidate images following the Ford-Carter debates. To be sure, this was not the case in 1960, when Kennedy's image was enhanced in several important respects as a consequence of his debate performance.[42]

In Table 2 the main predictors of post-debates image evaluations are pre-debates party identification and vote intention. Now, one might construe the difference in strength of these two predictors as an indicator of the impact of image alone. That is, the extent to which one's vote intention is correlated with image perceptions, beyond the prediction based on the correlation of images with prior party identification, could be an implicit indicator of "image voting." If this reasoning is valid, image voting in 1976 was most common among Non-Viewers of the debates. Party identification was a weaker predictor of both pre-debates voting intention and post-debates candidate images among the Non-Viewers than among those who watched the debates. On the other hand, it was also among the Non-Viewers that post-debates images were most strongly predicted by pre-debates voting plans. Image voting, then, seems to have been a phenomenon that had already exercised most of its influence prior to the debates. There is no evidence that the debates enhanced this tendency in voters. It was if anything eroded by exposure to the debates.

Other predisposition factors. The limited effects model is built around the general concept of predispositions that determine one's interpretation of mass media content. We can also examine in Table 2 two predispositional factors besides party identification. These are the measures of socioeconomic status, and of ideological differences (liberal-conservative) between the candidates' and the voter's own position. Neither of these proves to be a significant predictor of the vote when party identification and other, more immediate, factors are controlled. Overall, socioeconomic status is not significantly related to any of the other factors in the model. In the subgroup analyses, it is a significant predictor only of post-debates perceived issue differences among the Occasional Viewers. Ideology does

predict issue differences, and to a lesser extent perceived images, and through these it makes some indirect contribution to the eventual vote.

Issue voting. Although the limited effects model has not stood up very well to the empirical tests we have reviewed so far, its most important implications for evaluating debates are those having to do with issue voting. The limited-effects prediction would be that debates, even though they might contain considerable policy-related information, would have little impact because the interpretation of that information would be determined by prior political orientations. Put another way, people would not vote on the basis of their clarified issue perceptions, but rather would assimilate these perceptions into their pre-existing constructions of the situation. To examine the role of issue voting in connection with debate viewing in 1976, an index of issue distances between each voter and the two candidates was calculated using the four issues listed in Table 1. The post-debates perceived issue difference was added to the model of vote decision-making in Table 2.

For the total sample, these issue differences did not significantly predict the vote, and they were themselves strongly accounted for by predispositional factors. Among the Regular Viewers of the debates, however, this was not the case. The votes of these citizens were more strongly predicted by issue differences than by any other factor in the model. Conversely, predispositions accounted less well for the post-debates issue perceptions of the Regular Viewers than of the other two groups.

Summary. As a departure from expectations based on conventional theory, these are probably the most significant findings coming out of the 1976 debates studies: Prior to the debates, many voters were self-reportedly undecided, and they looked to the debates for information about the candidates' stands on policy issues. The debates provided issue information, and most voters watched and learned from them. Those who were the most regular viewers changed the most in their voting intentions, were the ones least influenced by predispositional factors, and were the most likely to vote in conformance with policy differences they perceived between themselves and the candidates.

Discussion: Informed Voting

Dennis et al. have used the term "bonding" and an analogy to chemistry to characterize what happened.[43] Just as various chemical elements can combine with one another to form stable molecules, so can the various perceptual and experiential elements of politics combine with one another. The end result is the vote, a molecular combination of various factors. The difficulty for researchers has been that, unlike elements in chemistry, such directional political factors as party, ideology, status, images, and issues tend to be positively intercorrelated so that they appear in aggregate analyses all to be reinforcing one another. In individual cases, though, they may point in different directions, and only certain of these factors may be used in reaching a voting decision. The debates, being enforcedly bi-directional in character, enter in the role of a catalyst rather than as an additional directional element. They modify the environment in which the directionally valenced elements are combining and help to determine which of these other elements has the most to do with the final product, the vote.

In terms of reinforcement, it is a matter of which factors become most strongly reinforced. Given that most of them will tend to point in a similar direction for a particular voter, it is quite noteworthy that the "effect" of attention to debates seems to be a reinforcement of issue positions at the expense of images or global predispositions. More specifically, regular viewing of the debates in 1976 was associated with bonding of issues to the vote decision; occasional viewing with bonding of prior, partisan affiliations; and non-viewing with bonding of images and vote intentions.

The debates were, then useful in different ways for different kinds of voters. Those who took most complete advantage of the information provided by the debates, as indicated by regular viewing, were enabled thereby to vote on the basis of current issues. Those who only occasionally watched the debates seem to have gained reassurance that their parties had nominated candidates for whom they could vote. Those who did not watch the debates had little reason to modify their voting intentions during the fall campaign.

While this empirical analysis suggests an affirmative answer to the question posed in the title of this paper, some immediate caveats are in order. As already noted, the debates are helpful in providing policy-relevant information, but only for certain voters: those who have not already decided how to vote, and those who pay fairly close attention to what is said in the debates. In 1976 a majority of voters may have fit this description, but this would by no means necessarily be true in all, or even most, elections. It may well be that the kind of catalytic impact we found from the Ford-Carter debates is limited to campaigns in which (a) at least one of the candidates is not well known, (b) many voters are undecided, (c) the contest appears to be a close one, and (d) party allegiances are weak.

Having entered those qualifications, let it be further pointed out that those are precisely the conditions under which debates between presidential candidates are likely to recur. In 1960 there were many nominal Democrats who had voted recently for a popular Republican (Eisenhower) and who knew little about Kennedy. In 1976 party ties had weakened historically, and Ford was much the better-known candidate. Both elections were extremely close, and this closeness was probably more a cause than an effect of the debates of either year. Turning this proposition around, we can (in the absence of compelling legislation) expect both candidates to agree to debate only when they expect a close election and they have evidence that there are large numbers of votes yet to be won.

The general conclusion of this paper on the point of value of debates to individual voters can be expressed in two propositions that represent the lower- and upper-limit boundary conditions. As a lower-limit proposition, it appears that a considerable number of voters (perhaps half of the total electorate) can benefit from debates when conditions are such that candidates are likely to debate, i.e. in a very close and fluid election situation. The upper-limit situation is more hypothetical, since it would apply to conditions that have never been observed

empirically: debates held despite a lopsided election situation in which almost all voters have decided, and a large majority favor one candidate.

Let us suppose that the experiment of 1960 had led to an institutionalization of presidential debates, so that there would have been Johnson-Goldwater debates in 1964 and Nixon-McGovern debates in 1972. (It is most debatable what would have taken place in the three-cornered campaign of 1968.) What would the value of such debates have been to the voters in either of these landslide years? The closest to an empirical answer that can be provided is that the upper-limit value would have been a function of (a) the proportion of the electorate that was undecided and seeking information about the candidates and their positions, and (b) the degree of attention given to the debates by those voters. While it is impossible to reconstruct the actual conditions that existed in the Septembers of either 1964 or 1972, it is doubtless safe to surmise that this upper limit would have been a much smaller value than was the case in 1976, the year for which we have actual data in hand.

While we are in the realm of conjecture, let us assume that in 1964 or 1972 the upper-limit value of debates for the voters would have been quite low. Say, for purposes of argument, that only 10% of the voters were open to any information that could have been provided via presidential debates in the Octobers of those years. It could reasonably be argued that the question, "Are debates helpful to voters?" should still be answered affirmatively. It is very unlikely that we will see in the imaginable future a U.S. election in which the upper-limit value of debates would shrink to zero. The empirical problem is to evaluate the cost-benefit tradeoffs of various debates policies.

There is certainly ample reason, from the experience of 1976, to argue for maintaining the concept of presidential debates as a possibility for future elections. Conditions will doubtless arise again when each candidate sees a reason to debate. The potential benefits to voters will always be non-zero and in those cases where the candidates are likely to agree to debate, the possible gains for

the electorate will be maximal. On the other hand, a policy under which a requirement to debate is written into the law, or one in which debating is made a condition for receiving federal campaign funds, would entail certain costs -- not the least of which would be severe strain on the principles of the Constitution. We should expect that an incumbent President would in most circumstances resist any compulsion to debate in a re-election campaign, so proponents of debates as a regular feature of all presidential campaigns would find themselves in opposition to the most powerful political institution in the country, the White House. Given barriers such as these, the marginal benefit to be realized on behalf of the electorate might well be outweighed by the inherent costs. Short of statutory institutionalization, but beyond the present "system" whereby debates are brokered by candidates the way prizefights are brokered by boxers, there are a number of intermediate steps that can be taken to increase the possibility that debates will be held in some -- if not all -- future national elections. The analysis of this paper can help to assess the potential benefits that might be at stake in any such efforts.

Latent Systemic Functions

Beyond the direct usefulness of debates for voters, we are also beginning to get some idea of the functions debates can serve for the larger political system. There are at least two ways of looking at these latent functions: those which are of benefit to the enduring institutions of government and polity, and those which enable the administration that wins a particular election to govern effectively. There is beginning to accumulate some evidence that debates are functional at each of these levels of analysis.

In terms of enduring institutions, the Wisconsin data indicate that the 1976 campaign was a period of growing public confidence in the major components of the U.S. national government. From before the debates to after the election, significant increases were found in measures of confidence in the Presidency, the Congress,

and the Federal Government.[44] There was also a slight (non-significant) gain in confidence in the Supreme Court. More important, these gains were positively correlated with various measures of exposure to the campaign, including the debates. With the person's pre-debates level of confidence in the four institutions controlled in a hierarchical regression analysis, there was a significant positive relationship between total exposure to the debates and post-debates confidence (beta=.14).

The debates also can be credited with a role in political socialization, or the recruitment of new members into the body politic. In a panel study of 6th, 9th and 12th graders in a small Wisconsin town, regression analyses showed debates exposure to be the strongest of eight predictors of post-debates interest in the election, with pre-debates interest controlled.[45] Among the older adolescents, discussion of the debates was also an important predictor of increases in interest. Among the younger students, debate viewing and discussion also correlated with increases in perceived political efficacy, and in partisanship. The socialization process as facilitated by the debates appears to be a smooth one. The older adolescents, in comparison with the younger respondents in the panel, reacted somewhat more like adults: they watched the debates more for issue information and less to be reminded of their candidates' strong points, and they determined their preferences more on the basis of party ties and less due to image characteristics. Another study, designed to compare young voters with older voters, found very similar reasons for watching, and reactions to, the debates for the two groups.[46] The younger voters were somewhat more affected by the debates, in terms change in their perceptions of the candidates' issue positions.

The latent function of establishing a stronger basis for the successful candidate to govern once elected is not so well documented as are the tions of the debates for the political system in general. Following the 1960 debates, Katz and Feldman speculated that "the debates might make for a greater acceptance of the winning candidate -- even if one voted against him: one knew

more about him, one felt that he was more human and more accessible."[47] This hypothesis was tested in the 1976 Wisconsin panel study, by separating the image evaluations of the candidates according to the respondent's eventual vote. There was a steady improvement from before until after the debates in the rating of the candidate the person was voting for, but the evaluation of the other candidate declined somewhat.[48] These changes were not significantly associated with the extent to which the person watched the debates, or paid attention to media follow-up reports and evaluations of them. But they were correlated with discussion of the debates. In hierarchical regression with the person's pre-debates evaluation controlled, debates discussion was significantly a positive predictor of post-debates ratings of the candidate voted for (beta=.19), and a negative predictor of the equivalent ratings of the other candidate (beta=-.12). No other campaign communication measure tested was as strong a predictor of these changes.[49] So if anything, we should consider that the evidence is against the hypothesis suggested by Katz and Feldman.

Also on shaky empirical ground is the possibility that the debates would enhance the international stature of the new administration. Although the 1976 debates were reportedly televised in 91 countries, we have data on reactions to them from only one nation, the Netherlands.[50] A survey conducted after the debates but before the election found that the Dutch respondents, even those who considered themselves liberals, overwhelmingly favored Ford in the U.S. election. This is probably attributable in large measure to the incumbent's much greater prominence in international news; a new government is probably always a bit suspect in the eyes of the rest of the world. The debates might have served to make Carter more acceptable abroad, and to make clearer that he was the more liberal candidate. The Netherlands data, while open to alternative interpretations, are consistent with this hypothesis. Although only 31% of the Dutch respondents watched the debates, those who did were much more likely to have a preference between Ford and Carter; less likely to prefer the more familiar incumbent; and more likely to align their preferences with their general ideological positions.[51] We can at least tentatively

infer that political learning from presidential debates is not confined to the American voters at whom the debates are directed.

The foregoing comprise the only latent functions of the debates on which evidence has been gathered. In general, they add to the overall accumulation of empirical arguments in favor of future debates. But there have been suggestions of latent dysfunctions as well. The personalization of politics that is associate with television may be exacerbated by candidate debates. This would implicate debates in the decline of U.S. political parties, which some attribute to televisio and many see as a serious loss for the political process.[52] Presidential debates also draw even greater attention to the Presidency, which is after all only one i stitution in a multi-level, multi-branch system of government. This centralizati of public attention may operate to the detriment of political rationality at less glamorous levels.[53] Another dysfunctional possibility is that debates may encour the growing tendency to rely on television for one's information on public affair Our better informed citizens are those who read newspapers and magazines to get t news.[55] The debates of 1976 had, at least in the short term, a tendency to lead more attention to the campaign on television, although they also seem to have cre a slight increase in attention via print and interpersonal channels too.[56]

Conclusion

We are far from having a full balance-sheet accounting of the functions and dysfunctions, manifest and latent, of presidential debates. Beyond the need for more evidence, there are many value judgments involved. Not everyone would agree, for example, that personalized rather than issue-oriented campaigns are undesirabl or that the maintenance of strong political parties and an electorate that gets its information from newspapers are desirable. But the burden of evidence to date when intersected with traditional democratic values, should encourage us to attach a rather high net value to the debates as an emerging institution in the political process.

Footnotes

1. Estimates of the proportion of "undecided" voters are notoriously soft. In the week prior to the debates, a statewide probability sample of Wisconsin adults showed that 55% had a preference between Ford and Carter. In later interviewing waves, some of them became less certain of their voting intentions. On Election Day, a higher percentage of the "undecided" people did not vote. Of those who eventually did vote, only 31% had said they were "definitely" decided before the debates, and never expressed indecision in later waves. Whatever indicator is used, there appears to have been much more voter indecision on the eve of the 1976 debates than at comparable points in previous presidential election campaigns on which data are available. See Chaffee and Dennis (1977); Chaffee and Choe (1978).

2. On the decline of partisanship, see Nie, Verba and Petrocik (1976). The schism within the Democratic party is thoroughly documented in Miller, Miller, Raine and Brown (1976).

3. There is no evidence of greater variation in people's perceptions of Carter's positions than of Ford's. But there was more inclination to respond "don't know" when asked Carter's position on a given issue (see Table 1 of this paper), and many voters had taken up the complaint of his various opponents (both those who were more liberal, and those more conservative) that Carter was "fuzzy on the issues."

4. Of six personal "image" scales, the strongest correlate of vote changes during the fall 1976 campaign in Wisconsin was "honesty and integrity" (Dennis, Chaffee and Choe, in press).

5. Major sources of data on uses anticipated, and gratifications received, from the debates include McLeod, Durall, Ziemke and Bybee (in press); O'Keefe and Mendelsohn (in press); and Becker, Cobbey and Sobowale (in press).

6. A first-person account of the strategy underlying Ford's challenge to debate is provided by his former chief of staff and key campaign operative (Cheney, 1977). On Carter's side, the strategy outline is based on interviews of two central campaign planners, Patrick Caddell and Gerald Rafshoon, by a reporter who later joined Rafshoon's firm (Lesher, 1977).

7. Post-hoc speculation as to what happened in the 1960 debates is ubiquitous throughout the literature on political mass communication. A good summary of this rather jaundiced view is Kirkpatrick (1977). See also Kraus (1962) for data supporting it.

8. In the spring of 1963, the American Political Science Association appointed a Commission on Presidential Campaign Debates, which consisted of Carl J. Friedrich, Evron M. Kirkpatrick, Harold D. Lasswell, Richard E. Neustadt, Peter H. Odegard, Elmo Roper, Telford Taylor, Charles A.H. Thompson and Gerhart D. Wiebe. Their report, published in 1964, is now out of print. An updated summary of it has been written by Kirkpatrick (1977). Many of the comments the commission received (from more than one-third of U.S. congressmen, governors, and state party chairmen) stressed the dangers of an incumbent President debating.

9. Kirkpatrick (1977) summarizes this viewpoint extensively.

10. This author has collaborated in a summary of 1976 debates studies (Sears and Chaffee, in press) and an assessment of the value of debates (Chaffee and Dennis, 1977). The summative statements here are drawn largely from those collaborative papers, although the conclusions reached here are those of the present author.

11. This viewpoint reflects the gradual shift in mass communication research from source-oriented concepts such as "persuasion" and "effects" to receiver-oriented concepts such as "uses and gratifications" and "information." A fuller delineation of this trend is

presented in Chaffee (1977). The predominant model in the field today is probably the "transactional" approach, which attempts to embrace both source- and receiver-orientations simultaneously (Bauer, 1964; Kraus and Davis, 1976).

12. Kraus (1962); Sears and Chaffee (in press); Robinson (in press).

13. Robinson (in press) summarizes the results of various polls, including Nielsen's.

14. The range for other polling organizations (Roper, Harris, Associated Press) was from 64% to 72% (Robinson, in press).

15. It should be noted that most, perhaps all, of these are partisan events and so are subject to selective exposure based on partisan ties. For example, the Ervin Committee's 1973 hearings on the Watergate scandals were watched much more by Democrats than by Republicans (Kraus and Chaffee, 1974).

16. There has been remarkably little academic study of the audiences for televised sporting events. Almost invariably a given contest is broadcast on only one network, whereas the presidential debates have had the advantage of blanketing all network prime time on the evenings they have been held.

17. Kraus (1962); Kirkpatrick (1977).

18. See sources cited in footnote 5; also Sears and Chaffee (in press).

19. O'Keefe and Mendelsohn (in press).

20. Evidence that, despite favorable evaluations overall, the debates were not rated as favorably after they had taken place as they had been in anticipatory pre-debates ratings, is reviewed in Sears and Chaffee (in press).

21. PBS/Roper polls press releases, WNET/13, New York City, 1976; O'Keefe and Mendelsohn (in press).

22. McLeod et al. (in press); PBS Roper polls (see footnote 21).

23. McLeod et al. (in press); Abelson (1977).

24. O'Keefe and Mendelsohn (in press); Lang and Lang (in press); Kinder, Denney and Wagner (1977).

25. Lang and Lang (in press).

26. Miller and MacKuen (in press); Jackson-Beeck and Meadow (1977).

27. Miller and MacKuen (in press).

28. The result was not to distort the relative emphasis given to one issue over another, however. For example, economic issues were mentioned more than any other category, occupying 37% of the time of the debates. Economic issues were also the most prominent category in press reports, but occupied only 14% of newspaper space and 5% of TV time because of the overshadowing of issue content by other elements of "debates news" (Miller and MacKuen, in press).

29. Carter (1962); Sebald, cited in Katz and Feldman (1962).

30. Becker, Cobbey and Sobowale (in press); Lang and Lang (in press); Morrison, Steeper and Greendale (1977).

31. Becker, Cobbey and Sobowale (in press).

32. Baker and Walter (1977); Cantrall (1977); Lang and Lang (in press); Morrison, Steeper and Greendale (1977).

33. Becker, Cobbey and Sobowale (in press); Cantrall (1977); Dennis, Chaffee and Choe (in press); Lupfer (1977); McLeod et al. (in press).

34. Cantrall (1977); Lang and Lang (in press); Lupfer (1977).

35. Joslyn (1975); McLeod et al. (in press).

36. Miller and MacKuen (in press).

37. Cater (1962).

38. This estimate is based on the facts that some 80% of the total adult population watched the debates, and that non-voters were drawn disproportionately from non-watchers.

39. Chaffee and Choe (1978) developed these estimates from secondary analyses of the panel data of McLeod et al. (in press); Becker, Pepper, Wenner and Kim (in press); and Dennis, Chaffee and Choe (in press).

40. The most comprehensive early exposition of the limited effects model is Klapper (1960). The interpretation of that model for this paper is the product of the present author, however, and is drawn from many sources including Pool (1963), Sears and Whitney (1973), Berelson and Steiner (1964); and such critiques as Kraus and Davis (1976) and Chaffee (1975).

41. Kraus (1962). This judgment may have passed irretrievably into the conventional wisdom with the unsubstantiated assertion by McLuhan (1964) that "TV would inevitably be a disaster for a sharp intense image like Nixon's, and a boon for the blurry, shaggy texture of Kennedy."

42. Katz and Feldman (1962), after reviewing several studies in which this was found, suggest that it was due to the fact that "Kennedy had the 'advantage' of being all but unknown." If that were the reason, however, it should have applied as well to Carter, who made no comparable gain. A revised explanation might be that the less-known candidate does have the opportunity to enhance his image more, but that the first debate is the critical one for this purpose. Kennedy did rather well in his first debate, whereas Carter did not, and perhaps thereby lost his chance to pick up "image" points. Most studies show that the first debate is not only the one most people watch, it is also the one that makes much the greatest difference in perceptions of the candidates (Sears and Chaffee, in press).

43. Dennis, Chaffee and Choe (in press). The bonding concept also appears in the study of adolescents by Hawkins, Pingree, Smith and Bechtolt (in press).

44. Dennis and Chaffee (1977).

45. Hawkins et al. (in press).

46. McLeod et al. (in press).

47. Katz and Feldman (1962).

48. Dennis and Chaffee (1977).

49. The other communication measures tested in this analysis included attention to the campaign on television; attention to the campaign in newspapers and magazines; and discussion of the campaign. Separate measures of viewing of each of the four debates were also tested.

50. deBock (1977).

51. This finding may be spurious, i.e. it may not indicate any "effect" of viewing the debates, but could simply be attributed to the high likelihood that people who watched the debates were in other respects more politically attuned and informed.

52. Kraus and Davis (1976); Kirkpatrick (1977).

53. Chaffee and Dennis (1977); Kirkpatrick (1977).

54. Chaffee and Dennis (1977).

55. Chaffee, Jackson-Beeck, Durall and Wilson (1977).

56. Analysis by Choe, described in Chaffee and Dennis (1977), Appendix Table A.

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